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PA. STATE BOARD
OF EDUCATION

Dear State Board of Education:

I am the Legislation and Advocacy Chairman for Pennsylvania PTA. I am also a parent of two sons who attend public school in the Baldwin-Whitehall School District and I have an elementary education degree from Penn State University. I am writing you in support of the new Chapter 49 teacher quality regulations. I know how important it is for all teachers to be prepared to teach students with disabilities and English language Learners. Teachers are currently not well-prepared to effectively teach students with disabilities, English language learners, and other diverse learners. As a result, many students are denied the chance to learn in an inclusive setting.

Many English Language Learners (ESL) are placed in the Baldwin-Whitehall School District through Catholic Charities. Many of these students are refugees. Frequently, these students do not yet have sufficient proficiency in English to be able to succeed academically in traditional all-English-medium classrooms. Even though our school district has language acquisition programs where native-language instruction is increasingly merged with instruction in English until proficient the ESL students are still mainstreamed and many times our teachers are unfamiliar with the language our ESL students speak. It is extremely difficult for these children who do not understand what their teachers are explaining to do well in school.

Additionally, from my personal experience, I can speak in regard to an autistic child that was in my younger son's class two years in a row. The autistic boy would have periods where he would have outbursts, which at times would get physical. Although the boy had an instructional assistant with him at all times, the 2nd grade classroom teacher was not trained in crucial skill areas that apply for students with disabilities. For the safety of all, when the boy would have a physical outburst the class had a secret word, "vamoose." When the teacher said the word vamoose, the children were to leave the room and go into the hall immediately. This happened several times throughout the year. On occasions throughout the year, a few children were injured, including the instructional aide. Midway through the school year the 2nd grade classroom teacher could not handle the situation any longer so the autistic child was placed in another 2nd grade class. The following year in third grade the autistic child was uprooted and placed in a different class once again, this time because the classroom teacher was pregnant and could not handle the child. These classroom assignment changes were disruptive for the autistic child. Children with a disability deserve a highly qualified teacher to ensure that they receive support and the same advantages as all children to achieve. To help all students improve their achievement, teachers must increase their own knowledge and skills and learn new teaching methods, including training in special education.

The new proposal would give teachers the skills they need to help all students reach their potential. Special education teachers would have more academic knowledge and expertise in the actual grade levels they teach. In the past, the state has often ignored the educational needs of the most vulnerable children. Most teachers do not have the tools needed to provide equal access to quality instruction.

Pennsylvania PTA supports strong stringent new teacher-quality requirements. Pennsylvania PTA supports legislation, policies and regulations that would continue to upgrade the standards for professional development programs, including parent involvement, requiring that professional development activities include training on how to effectively involve parents and other family members in their children's education to increase student learning. Teachers need to be qualified, diverse, and well prepared to meet the needs of all of today's students. All teachers have to be

better prepared to teach diverse learners in inclusive settings. Inclusion, which is mandated by law, will only be successful if all teachers know how to teach diverse learners. Research has shown that all students benefit from having high-quality teachers. Yet, the more challenging student populations are disproportionately taught by less experienced educators. New teachers have needs that must be addressed to ensure that they are prepared to enter the classroom and do not quickly become discouraged and leave the profession. To fulfill the national goal to close the achievement gap, low-income and diverse students must no longer be denied a fair share of the learning opportunity that ensure their success in school, such as highly prepared teachers. Pennsylvania PTA supports high standards for teacher preparation, licensing, hiring, and professional development for educators, particularly for beginning teachers, to promote the achievement of all students.

Pennsylvania PTA urges the board to adopt the regulations so that all teachers are prepared to teach students with disabilities and English Language Learners in inclusive settings, as required by state and federal law. The proposal does not increase the overall professional training hours required, but would ensure that within these hours all teachers get skills to strengthen their ability to help diverse learners. The proposal wisely spreads out the new requirements, so that teachers will gain some skills in college and will continue learning about how to teach diverse learners throughout their career. Lastly, Pennsylvania PTA feels that the proposal gives colleges, school districts, and teachers great flexibility to meet the new rules in a different way; get credit for existing courses, add content and structure to the curricula in "methods," "student teaching," and other courses, and allows professors to teach in pairs or teams.

On behalf of Pennsylvania PTA and parents of the Commonwealth, I urge the Board to give final approval to the new Chapter 49 regulations. The proposal will ensure that all teachers have the ability to teach students with disabilities and English Language Learners in regular classrooms. In addition, the proposal will allow special education teachers to know more about the subjects they teach at the appropriate grade level. Further delay is not warranted.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Suzy Gerst



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